
The Region in Review: International Issues and Events, 1990

By the beginning of 1990 the Cold War concerns that had played such an important part in the "internationalization" of the South Pacific from the mid-1980s had abated. Some observers of South Pacific affairs argued that this would mean a diminution of interest on the part of the major powers and, as a consequence, that Pacific Island states would find it increasingly difficult to attract the level of economic assistance they had grown used to under Cold War conditions. Developments in the South Pacific during 1990 suggest, however, that these predictions are unfounded. The region did not revert to "backwater" status in the eyes of the major powers. This was partly because new rationales for regional involvement were developed in the light of changed circumstances, and partly because of the continued existence of long-standing objectives unrelated to the East-West struggle. Developments in the South Pacific continued to be seen by these larger countries as having the potential to affect their global, or at least broader Asian-Pacific, interests.

One of the most interesting and important developments was the increased attention accorded the South Pacific in United States policy and the suggestion that such attention was becoming institutionalized. This was interesting because it was happening at a time when alarmism about Soviet intentions in the region, and concern about the vulnerability of the area to Soviet entreaties, had declined from a mid-decade high. It constituted, there-

fore, one of the strongest indications that the end of the Cold War did not mean an end to great power interest in the South Pacific. It was important because it suggested the institutionalization of a direct and comprehensive involvement in regional affairs by the world's most powerful country for the first time since the Second World War, a development that changes the pattern of regional politics in a fundamental way.

Two important landmarks in United States policy in 1990 were the release of the recommendations of the congressional delegation to the South Pacific (the Solarz Report) in May and President Bush's meeting with the leaders of all Pacific Islands states in Honolulu in November. The Solarz Report reflects the stance of American policy toward the broader Asian-Pacific region at this time: While the Cold War may be over in Europe there is as yet no indication of a change in Soviet military capacity in the Asian-Pacific region. Further, there may be a return to a leadership with a less benign foreign policy. Therefore the United States' Pacific policy must continue to counter Soviet influence as well as prepare for the post-Cold War period in the region. In the post-Cold War era the Pacific should remain an "American lake"—one in which the United States plays the role of "balancer," providing regional order and stability. Forces should continue to be forward deployed, and access to facilities throughout the region should be sought.

The Solarz Report may be seen against the backdrop of this broader policy approach and is a product of the transition. It attempts to straddle two eras—the Cold War and the post-Cold War. Its emphasis on the need to compete with Soviet influence in the South Pacific should be seen in this light. Equally important, it is a blueprint for a post-Cold War United States involvement in the South Pacific.

The Solarz Report signals a greater significance for the South Pacific within the United States' broader Pacific policy than existed during the Cold War. The very existence of a congressional report, and of a congressional visit, indicates the new importance, particularly when the visit was led by such an eminent congressman. The recommendations confirm a trend in United States thinking since 1985—that the United States should have its own regional policy and presence and should not rely on others, namely Australia and New Zealand, to represent its interests. Consonant with this general proposition, the report advocated a more extensive diplomatic network, a higher level of participation in the South Pacific Commission, and a stepping up of United States educational and economic programs. The importance of this report was reflected later in the year, when many of its recommendations were taken up by President Bush in his meeting with Pacific Island leaders.

The presidential summit, as it came to be called, was unprecedented. This was the first time that the leaders of Pacific Island states had met as a group with a president of the United States. The symbolic importance of the occa-

sion was not lost on those present. For several years many Pacific Island leaders had been seeking more direct involvement by the United States in South Pacific affairs and more direct access for South Pacific states in Washington.

As Prime Minister Geoffrey Henry of the Cook Islands said in his response to the president on behalf of the assembled leaders, "We in the Pacific have tended to think your country is too far away and too concerned with the problems of other places and you weren't as interested in the problems of the people of our region. You have changed that quite considerably, single-handedly" (*SSB&A* 28 Oct 90, B3).

While the symbolism was more important than the substance of the talks, the outcome of the meeting was certainly not unimportant. The most immediate issue of concern from the point of view of the Pacific Island leaders, was that of the proposed incineration of chemical weapons at Johnston Atoll. The president "assured" the Pacific leaders, "we plan to dispose of only the chemical munitions from the Pacific Theater currently stored at Johnston Atoll, any obsolete materials found in the Pacific Islands, and those relatively small quantities shipped from Germany. . . . Once the destruction is completed we have no plans to use Johnston Atoll for any other chemical munitions purpose, or as a hazardous waste disposal site" (*SSB&A* 28 Oct 90, B3). On the face of it, this was a concession to the strong Pacific Island opposition to the use of Johnston Atoll for chemical weapon incineration. The United States would presumably have preferred to keep its options open,

knowing that there will be more weapons to destroy and that there will be considerable opposition to the use of mainland sites. On the other hand, the use of the phrase "no plans" permits a change of mind in changed circumstances. From the American point of view, this was a successful outcome because the Pacific leaders reluctantly accepted the existing program of destruction of chemical weapons on Johnston Atoll, whereas before the meeting they had been strongly opposed to it.

The president also used the occasion to announce a number of new initiatives: the establishment of a Joint Commercial Commission with the island nations to identify and address commercial opportunities and trade concerns; a 1991 mission of American investors to the South Pacific under the leadership of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation; plans to begin negotiation to extend the South Pacific Regional Fisheries Treaty; the addition of Agency for International Development private sector assistance programs; and new educational exchanges.

Superpower détente made it difficult for the People's Republic of China (PRC) to continue to use the need to counter Soviet influence as a rationale for its involvement in the South Pacific. Yet, if anything, PRC interest in the region continued to rise in 1990, reflecting the more important and unstated objectives of its South Pacific policy: developing influence in the broader Asian-Pacific region and competing for influence, and ultimately for diplomatic recognition, with Taiwan. It also reflected the continuing interest of Fiji's Interim Government in Chinese

economic and military assistance. In April the PRC financed Major General Rabuka's first overseas trip since the 1987 coups—a visit to Beijing (*PIM*, May 1990, 7).

For Taiwan, too, there was a stepping up of diplomatic activity in the region in 1990, which may principally be seen as a continuation of Taiwan's efforts since the early 1970s to gain diplomatic recognition in the region. Having already succeeded on this score with Tonga, Tuvalu, Nauru, and the Solomon Islands, it concentrated its efforts on expanding its links with Tonga, opening an embassy in Nauru, attempting to turn economic links into diplomatic recognition in Vanuatu, and seeking Dialogue Partner status with the South Pacific Forum (*PIM*, Oct 1990, 18).

Although it is in close economic association with most Pacific Island countries, Taiwan's fishing practices continue to create strains in the relationship. In 1990, this mainly concerned the involvement of Taiwanese fishers in the gill-net fishing of albacore tuna. Specific tensions arose with Vanuatu when the Lini government was reportedly irritated by the attempt of Taiwan's trade representative to link economic deals to diplomatic recognition (*IB*, Oct 1990, 4-1). The attempt to gain Dialogue Partner status at the Forum aroused the PRC, which had already obtained that status. The PRC warned that it would regard Taiwan's accession to Dialogue Partner status as acceptance by the Forum of a "Two Chinas" policy and therefore unacceptable (Mangnall 1990a). The question was put before a committee to report to the next Forum.

The continuation of the Japanese

regional involvement that had been instituted in the Cold War context of 1985 to 1987 was confirmed in 1990. Again, the lessening of concern about Soviet intentions in the region, ostensibly a major element in the launching of the Kuranari Doctrine (which called for an increased Japanese presence in the region), did not result in a pull-back in Japanese interest. Two developments in particular demonstrated a desire for continued involvement in regional affairs. One was the decision to suspend gill-net fishing by Japanese fishers in South Pacific waters as a response to the strong concerns of Pacific Island states. This was a major concession. The other was the announcement by the observer for the Japanese government to the South Pacific Commission's annual conference in Noumea in October that Japan was interested in becoming a member. He indicated that Japan could not give financial assistance to an organization of which it was not a member. This was a significant step. Although Japan had indicated an interest in membership since 1987 this had previously been communicated through Pacific Island countries that supported its case. This was the first time Japan had explicitly stated its desire to be admitted as a member.

Nevertheless, some tensions remained in Japan-Pacific Islands relations over the continuing reluctance of the Japanese government to enter a regional agreement on fisheries access similar to that reached with the Americans in 1987.

Events of 1990 indicated that for France, too, the transition to the post-Cold War era made no difference to its desire to be engaged in South Pacific

regional politics. The only change was the dropping of Cold War justifications for its presence. The substantive objectives of French policy remained. The year was marked by an increase in French involvement in the region outside its own territories: the opening up of French regional universities to students from other countries in the South Pacific, the forging of closer relations with Vanuatu spurred by the Lini government's desire to redress what it claimed to be the damage done to these relations by Barak Sope, the establishment of assistance with maritime surveillance for Fiji and the Cook Islands, and the normalization of relations with Australia (*PR*, 30 Aug 1990, 4; 5 July 1990, 2; 16 Aug 1990, 6). General Rabuka also announced the possibility of French assistance with US\$7.7 million for a maintenance workshop for the Fiji military and hinted at the possibility of a defense pact with France (*PIM*, May 1990, 7; Aug 1990, 14).

The French South Pacific Council meeting in May in Pape'ete included President Mitterrand, Prime Minister Rocard and seven ministers of the French Cabinet. After the meeting, Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Edwidge Avice claimed in a public statement that the policies of the Socialist government had led to "a very clear improvement of France's situation in the South Pacific" (*PR*, 7 June 1990, 6). Nevertheless, there were still some indications of tension in France's relations with the region in 1990. The South Pacific Forum decided to take up the concerns of the Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS) that the Forum should oversee progress under the Matignon Accords in New Caledonia. However, the Forum's deci-

sion to send a delegation to New Caledonia was thwarted by the French authorities. The decolonization issue was also kept alive by the Solomon Islands government, which pressed at the United Nations for the listing of French Polynesia with the UN Decolonization Committee (PR, 11 Oct 1990, 3). And at the South Pacific Conference in October, Pacific Island delegates were unhappy with the French attempt to move the headquarters of the organization to make way for tourism development.

Australia's policy approach to the South Pacific in 1990 was based on recently revised assumptions about the region following the end of the Cold War, and the internal political turmoil in Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea in the late 1980s. The assumptions were that the Soviet Union was no longer a threat; that the security problem of the future was internal and related to development rather than an external threat; and that Pacific Island societies are complex and diverse and should be respected as independent players in regional politics instead of being treated as manipulable agents of foreign influence. Reflecting this shift in assumptions were some significant changes in the doctrine guiding Australia's South Pacific policy. The attempt to deny the Soviet Union any influence in the region was replaced by the policy objective of denying unconstructive involvement on the part of any external power (and welcoming constructive Soviet involvement). Australia's role as agent for Western interests was to be eschewed in favor of identifying with the region in a policy of "constructive commitment"—a "partnership" role

involving respect for the sovereignty of Pacific Island states.

Much of this rethinking was formalized in the *Ministerial Statement on Australia's Regional Security* released late in 1989 (Evans 1989). However, events of 1990 revealed that the new approach had a number of internal tensions and that, for Pacific Island states, its central claims of respect for sovereignty and a commitment to noninterference seemed to sit oddly with the implementation of Australian policy.

An important tension in the new policy approach existed in relation to the promotion of "regional order" objectives, on the one hand, and the promotion of human rights and democracy on the other. This surfaced in the context of Australia's attitude to Fiji. It appeared that Australia was running two policies in 1990, one moving toward normalization of relations, the other putting international pressure on Fiji to move away from a racially based constitution. The former was represented in Prime Minister Hawke's reported conciliatory remarks about the Fiji constitution to the press after talking with Ratu Mara at the South Pacific Forum, and the latter by Senator Evans' criticisms of the Fiji constitution as being racially based during a speech at the United Nations. Senator Evans was accused by Ratu Mara of interference in Fiji's internal affairs and was told he would be unwelcome in Fiji during his upcoming tour of the South Pacific (see Mangnall 1990b; SMH, 30 Oct 1990, 9; Grigson 1990, 3).

The low point in Australia's relations with the Pacific Island states as a group occurred at the South Pacific Forum in August, when the issue of the

United States' intention to burn chemical weapons at Johnston Island was discussed. Australia was seen as representing American interests, being uncompromising in its attitudes, being manipulative in its approach, and its Prime Minister as being abrasive in style.

Although preoccupied with domestic economic and political difficulties, New Zealand's Labour government also engaged in a reassessment of its policy approach to the region during the year. The report of the South Pacific Policy Review Group (*Towards a Pacific Island Community*, 1990), released in May, was the major contribution to this process. In its own words, the report is about "coming to terms with our neighbourhood, and New Zealand's place as one of a community of Pacific Island countries" (1). Specific recommendations included the opening of new diplomatic posts, the establishment of a Pacific parliamentary association as a step toward a Pacific parliament, examination of the possibility of creating a Pacific free trade area, the adoption of a "coordinated and comprehensive approach" toward meeting the security concerns of the Pacific Island region, and continuance of traditional levels of Pacific Island immigration. Probably the most contentious recommendations concerned New Zealand's relations with Fiji: that regular ministerial contact and Royal New Zealand Air Force surveillance flights be restored.

A change of government occurred before any comprehensive response to the review was announced by the Labour government. Based on other policy pronouncements, it is clear that

the Palmer government accepted, at least at a rhetorical level, the notion of "comprehensive security" canvassed in the report. However, it is likely that economic restraints would have made it difficult for a government to implement many of the recommendations at this time regardless of their desirability. By the end of the year it was still unclear how the new Bolger government might depart from its predecessor in its policy toward the Pacific Islands. Foreign Minister Don McKinnon's meeting with Ratu Mara at Auckland airport did, however, signal the possibility of a change in New Zealand's approach to Fiji.

The events of 1990 confirmed that the collective decisions of Pacific Island states have begun to matter to larger countries outside the region. The United States had to take seriously the collective concern about chemical weapon destruction in the region. Japan changed its behavior in gill-net fishing in the Pacific, conscious of island opinion mobilized against the activity. Significantly, Japan announced the decision on the eve of the annual meeting of the South Pacific Forum. South Korea and Taiwan have indicated that they are considering similar action.

Australia was brought up short at the South Pacific Forum when it realized that it could no longer assume that its particular concerns would prevail as the regional consensus. The Forum meeting confirmed a trend already evident: that a regional voice can be powerful. In 1990 the Pacific Island states, through a much-strengthened and more effective South Pacific Forum, demonstrated that they were collec-

tively a major actor in the new matrix of international relationships that make up the contemporary international system of the Pacific.

Although the events of 1990 suggest a continuation in the interest and involvement of major powers, and of Australia and New Zealand, they also suggest that the pattern and structure of the international relations of the region is changing. In particular, they confirm four major trends: the decline in the relative influence of Australia and New Zealand; the institutionalization of French and American regional policies focused outside their own territories; the assertion of a stronger unified voice for the Pacific Island states; and the rising influence of the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, and Japan. It confirms a move away from the "ANZUS lake" and toward a more complex system of international relations.

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